

RUSSIAN AMERICA.

IN the maps of our great-grandfathers, what were then unknown patches of the earth's surface used to be adorned, in lack of other details, with hideous images of bears—signifying, doubtless, that these animals were monarchs of all they surveyed. In like fashion, some sprightly cavillers at the late transfer of Russian America to the Republic, have been parading their ignorance of that region by portraying it as crammed with icebergs from Dixon's Entrance to Behring's Straits. But now that Russian America is Russian America no longer, and the "gentleman from Oonemak" may soon be expected to whittle his desk in the House and imbibe his train-oil cocktail in the Lobby, facts about our new north-western lands should usurp the place of theory.

Jutting out from the continent like the stump of an arm shorn short, Russian America displays at the first glance the broad stretch of its domain—an area, in round figures, of 400,000 square miles. From Cape Muzon, its southernmost cape, in latitude $54^{\circ} 40'$, to Cape North, nearly in latitude 73° , is a sweep of eighteen degrees. From the easternmost summit of the mountain chain which divides it from Columbia, in longitude $131^{\circ} W.$, to the last little Aleutian isle, out alone in Behring's Sea, in longitude $176^{\circ} E.$, is a span of 53° . Again, from Island Prince of Wales, in the southeast corner, to Cape Prince of Wales, in the northwestern, the distance, as the crow flies, is about 1,500 miles, crossing none but Russian American soil: the line joining any other corners is something less.

What is the climate of this new territory of ours? The whole country seems to have been vaguely set down, hitherto, as, in Claudio's phrase, a "thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice"—a barren, cheerless Arctic tract, an ante-chamber to the Pole, a country where

Icy mountains, high on mountains piled,
Seem to the shivering sailors from afar
Shapeless and white, an atmosphere of clouds.

On the other hand, one scientific gentleman (not really designing to abuse the country) has incautiously described the climate of the coast, as far as Behring's Straits, as "about the same, in Winter, as that of Washington"—than which no comparison could be more unsavory. However, this last assertion is *couleur de rose*: the average climate and temperature of the coast from British Columbia to Behring's Straits, are almost precisely those of Newfoundland.

Rightly to understand the climate of Russian America, its geography must be studied. To begin with, a country stretching

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across eighteen parallels, from $54^{\circ} 40'$ to $72^{\circ} 40'$, may well have variety both of climate and products. This span embraces 1,200 miles on the same meridian, that is to say, a distance like that from Mobile to Montreal. Again, all students of physical geography know that the temperature of the North Pacific coast of this continent is much higher than that of the Atlantic coast on the same parallel. A thermal current from the China coast trends upward along the shores of Asia, and sets across toward Russian America, as the Gulf Stream sets across the Atlantic and raises the temperature of the European coast. According to the isothermal lines of Humboldt, since affirmed, Sitka, the territorial capital, has the mean temperature of St. Petersburg, while the whole coast, as far as Behring's Sea, has that of Newfoundland. The mean temperature at Sitka is $34^{\circ} 4'$ F. in Winter and $56^{\circ} 2'$ in Summer: the climate there is moist, with constant evaporation, little snow and much rain.

So much for the southeastern shore. Glancing at the southwestern, we find, in conning the chart (or the globe, which is less deceptive for high latitudes), that the harbors of Kodiak and Sitka are on the same parallel, and that the southernmost part of Russian America is the tip of this limb, not that of the other. By reason of its nearness to the Asiatic thermal current, Kodiak has rather a milder climate than Sitka. In fine, the Aleutian Islands and Alaska, whence they are broken off, have nearly the climate of the upper part of the British Isles, of which, by the way, they are the exact counterpart in position, being in the same latitude and an exact semicircle distant in longitude.

We are now prepared to look into the question of vegetation. As the fact that Russian America extends north and south a distance like that from Florida to Labrador explains the ludicrous discrepancies in the stories of its admirers and abusers (the one likening its climate to that of the Inferno of Dante, the other to that of the inferno of modern orthodoxy) so, too, this fact shows how the same country can grow both "wheat and walrus," "reindeer and radishes." The "wheat-growing line" of geographers passes in the neighborhood of New Archangel, and the "grain, barley, rye, oats" line includes the whole southerly coast, with the Aleutian Isles, round to Behring's Sea.

However, it is to be hoped that it is not for horticultural uses that the Republic aims to colonize Russian America. The climate of nine-tenths of it is too cold and the soil too sterile, to relieve such a purpose from being ludicrous. In a few favored spots, of which mention has been made, there is now a limited agriculture, and that of a primitive sort; elsewhere, none. Yet this scantiness of production is partly due to the fur companies, who have found it for their interest to import cereals rather than to divert labor into raising them. In the southern or coast districts and the islands, vege-

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tation is not backward. Cabbages, potatoes, lettuce and turnips can be grown there; hay is made in plenty, the grass being luxuriant; and as high as 60°, barley, buckwheat and rye can be raised.

Northern Russian America is good for nothing as regards vegetation, a few stunted shrubs and Alpine roots alone relieving the ice-fields. So, too, over a great part of the western or Behring's Straits coast—a thousand miles long—there is nothing valuable growing. The shores there are vacant of timber, and stunted bushes, containing untoothsome berries like the gooseberries and whortleberries of the higher Mackenzie district, alone show "the place where the trees ought to grow." The ground grows itself a shaggy coat of moss, as the animals do of fur, to expel the Winter's flaw, which, by the way, is a terrible affair through the funnel or flue of Behring's Straits. Under the moss, the sheltered soil is thawed about ten inches, and thence frozen solid deep into the bowels of the earth, while across the Straits, on the Asiatic side, the thawed globe is only about three inches deep, for lack of a moss blanket. The Esquimaux there, instead of avoiding the gales in Winter huts, pitches his shelter-tent of skin in an airy place, that the wind may blow the snow away.

Luckily, the upper waters of the Kvitchpak, like the Yukon through its whole length, are lined with forests, and the former noble river, like the Mississippi, throws out great rafts of drift wood at its *embouchure* in Bhering's Sea, a part of which, floating many miles along shore in the current which sets through the Straits, furnishes the post of St. Michael with its only fuel. But, beside the banks of the Kvitchpak, those of all rivers south of it, and most of the islands, are rich in fine timber—chiefly the upland cypress, varieties of the pine and larch, and the well-known "red-wood" peculiar to the Pacific coast. There are, also, black and white birch, good wood for fuel and building. The forests come down to the water's edge, and the estuaries are fringed with fine timber, so that a saw-mill built on a river bank would find its food at hand. There is no oak here, but there is, as we have shown, good lumber for shipbuilding, and some excellent spar timber. In a word, all lumber required for houses, vessels and boats, is to be had, and possibly some could be sold for the same purposes on the Asiatic coast.

That there are precious metals in Russian America admits no doubt; that they will not be worked in our day, admits of little less doubt. With Colorado seamed and ridged with gold, it is odd to hear anxious inquiries if the yellow ore may be had in our new possessions. On the Stekeen River, the most southerly of the considerable streams, gold has been discovered to exist. This, however, is a trivial matter. Near the mouth of the Kupfer or Copper River, half way between Mt. St. Elias and Prince William's

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Sound, copper has been found. What is worthier of note, iron has been both found and worked. Most important of all, coal is certainly to be had, two mines having been opened on the Aleutian Islands by the Russians, one of which, at Kodiak, is now working, and the produce blazing at the forge in repairing ships, and even supplying steam-vessels.

Apropos of coal, then, we leave gold, copper, cabbages and barley, to speak of more obvious benefits in Russian America. A hundred sail of our Pacific whaling fleet frequent the North Pacific; the number will be doubled, and the trade growing between Asia and America, especially in Japan and the Amoor country, will attract steamers, provided coaling and repairs can be made cheap and sure.

The Russian-American coast is full of fine harbors, scattered along a thousand miles. That of Sitka is open the year round. Ice, such is the moist climate, cannot be readily gathered near there for shipment to San Francisco, so that it is harvested higher up on the coast. Kodiak harbor, on the same parallel, is an excellent one. Cook's Inlet, between it and the mainland, is a fine sheet of water, broad, deep and navigable, so that that famous sailor, penetrating it, fancied it to be the northwest passage. Prince William's Sound, further east, has deep water. Between Prince of Wales Island and the Continent are several serviceable harbors. From the southeastern to the southwestern extremity of the seaboard, groups of islands line the coasts, under whose shelter small boats can traverse the shoal sounds by an "inside line" for a thousand miles. The coal at Kodiak, its fine harbor and endurable climate, will doubtless give it a claim as a naval station.

Salmon are abundant on the Kvitchpak, and excellent codfish and halibut on the coasts. The commerce in fisheries will one day be valuable for both continents, and fishermen will haunt these Pacific islands as they do the colder ones of the same latitude in the Atlantic. The intrinsic merits of Russian America had better be rested, not on its Washington-like climate and Lombardy gardens, but, like Newfoundland's, on its fisheries and its furs. Whales and walrus bob about plentifully in Behring's Sea, and their ivory and oil will be made very profitable. Even the ice-trade may be valuable, such are the facilities for making ice in the little lakes near the coast. As to the fur trade, it is declining, from the scarcity of the otter and seal; the beaver, too, is decreasing the world over.

Around all the islands, particularly the Aleutian, furs are still to be had. Those of the fur-seal and sea-beaver are magnificent. Red foxes are plenty, and have fine furs. Through the southwest peninsula and adjoining islands, is found the so-called "American sable," which is no sable at all, but a species of marten or mink, with hair much shorter and less glossy than that of the genuine

sable. There are ermines, muskrats, wolverines, whose furs may be seen in abundance in New York, mink, a species of river otter, and beavers in great numbers. In the north are reindeer; further south, the ordinary red deer of the forest.

In the Russian American question, the shabbiest item is the native people. These are few in number, and the fewer the better. The total population of the region is under 60,000, whereof the natives may be rudely set down at about 55,000. The latter are divided into two great and absolutely distinct races—the ordinary wood Indian, inhabiting the forest districts, and the Esquimaux. They have been, from the earliest record to the present, in hostilities, and in need of "military reconstruction," or a metropolitan police. The Esquimaux have regular and permanent settlements, but no form of government and no chiefs in authority, though the counsels of the elders are received with the respect due to years. The Indians, on the contrary, have their chieftains and "Big Indians." In breed, idiom of speech, and most traits, the Russian Esquimaux resemble those of Greenland—and, as to that, the Laps of Norway and Sweden. This race of train-oil eaters seems to have followed the Arctic circle around the globe, as if determined to "fight it out on that line." Wherever Esquimaux go, the reindeer go with them, and thus their zone, girdling the earth, is also fixed. While unable to congratulate the country on this accession to its voters (for disabilities of smell and color are now unconstitutional), we must own that the Esquimaux are teachable. Some have learned English, and a few are now living in California. Next we come to the "Indians not taxed." Of these, some tribes are lighter tinged than the copper-colored savages whom we call "redskins," and their ways also suggest alliance in origin with the yellow Asiatics. The Russian troops formerly had severe fights with them. They build excellent canoes, holding great numbers of warriors, for their raids. Formerly considered as ugly customers, they have lately got a better reputation. They are shrewd at a bargain, and have much mechanical skill in carving and imitative work. In these points, again, our thoughts are led back to the Chinese and other Asiatics. And, for those who will not be content except that all men shall derive from a single pair of ancestry, and yet are puzzled how to get the children of Adam across the Atlantic from Eden to people America—it needs only to point to the few miles of sea at Behring's Straits. On a fine Summer's day the Indians may be seen shooting across, in perpetual solution of the ethnic problem.

Russia never has valued her American possessions a straw. They are altogether too far from her centre of action. Russian America, besides, has been hopelessly garroted by a monopoly, being set down as mere corporation real estate. Above all, Russia has not long been a maritime nation, two-thirds of her commerce,

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a score of years ago, as statistics show, being in the hands of Great Britain alone. Russian America, therefore, cost her far more than it came to, and should it do as badly for us, the bargain will be a sorry one. However, no parallel exists between Russia's use of that territory and ours: for example, its fisheries (especially now that those of the Atlantic are jeopardized) will probably train seamen for our navy, while to Russia this benefit was nothing. For a Russian to go to Russian America was equal to Siberian exile, except for the honor and profit attendant. A bait of enormous salary—enough to drive crazy with wild expectancy, our already fluttering candidates for the post—reconciled nobles to taking the governorship. Rear-Admiral Furlghellem (a German name, but he was of Russian birth) held the post five years. Prince Macsautoff, whom some readers may have chanced to meet in Atlantic cities, succeeded him, and is still living with his charming wife and family in Sitka, in voluntary banishment from civilization.

The Russian colony is a petty affair. The Russians and half-breeds combined probably do not exceed 3,000 or 3,500, of whom the Russians number about 650. The half-breeds are commonly called "Creoles," an obvious misnomer aiming to designate the offspring of a Russian father and a native mother. The capital, New Archangel (or Sitka, as Americans generally call it), on the island of Baranov or Sitka, is a town of about 800 inhabitants. It boasts a fort, church, school and governor's mansion—a plain structure, looking like a well-to-do farm-house. The remaining architecture of Sitka is not impressive. The island, which slightly rises from the sea, has a good harbor: Sitka is the native name, the other a Russian euphuism. Beside the Greek church at Sitka, there are a few others along the coast: a new religious sect, accordingly, is added to our list, and the Frenchman's exclamation—"Mon dieu! what Republique! one thousand religions and only one gravity"—gains new point.

The Russian military force now there is trifling. At first it was from 350 to 400 strong; then, less than 200; now, hardly over 150 effectives. At Sitka, however, the fort has ordnance enough, of minute calibre, to employ a battalion in its serving. The military occupancy is a form, the governance of the territory being mainly left to the Company. Along the coast is strung a chain of twenty or thirty petty trading-posts, protected by, or, rather, visibly consisting of, a simple redoubt. The Russian term for this defence and station is *krepast*; we should perhaps call it stockade, or, more exactly, block-house. These posts and all that in them is, at Sitka and elsewhere, fall into our hands.

The Russian Company, wanting no intruders on its domains, has checked inducements to colonization. At its headquarters in St. Petersburg, it held a sort of *divisum imperium* with the Autocrat

over the northwesterly limb of America. The Government suffered its few troops—a single company only garrisoning Sitka itself—to dispel the ennui of military duties by Fur Company work, at a slight extra pay. The Company has many agents and hunters for the gathering of fish and furs, and eight or ten good, sea-going vessels, beside smaller craft. Fort Nicholas is on Cook's Inlet; Fort St. Michael, on Norton's Sound, a redoubt with accommodations for sixty persons, is the head station of the Company for Behring's Sea, seventy miles above the mouth of the Kvitchpak.

The Hudson's Bay Company has, on sufferance, one post, Fort Yukon, within "our" territory, at the junction of the Porcupine and Yukon rivers, where, in latitude 66° , they form the Kvitchpak. The treaties of 1825 and 1867 fix the line of demarcation, beyond dispute, along the meridian 141° W. The rival companies guard their hunters from collision by forbidding them a wide band of debatable ground midway between Fort Yukon and Fort St. Michael.

Behring's Straits—the sluiceway between the Pacific and Asia—always excites the student's curiosity. Along the neighboring shores are written up on cape and inlet and estuary the imperishable names of the hardy navigators who explored the coast—stout old Behring, Cook, Barrow, Norton, Kotzebue, and we might well add gallant Parry and Franklin. The shortest distance from hemisphere to hemisphere is but 39 nautical miles or 46 statute miles. In Summer, Indians ply to and fro in their walrus-skin canoes, the water being then often calm enough to cross a raft or skiff there. In Winter the way is frozen solid and the traveling is in sledges, the Indians trading the furs across from tribe to tribe. There are no icebergs of consequence here, but when the ice breaks up, it breaks usually into anchor ice. Whales then come down the straits, in their breeding-season, it being needful for them to seek soundings.

In the bight of this slender strait which binds two oceans and severs two continents, lie four little islands, whereof two come to us and two are remanded to Russia. To us comes the great isle of St. Lawrence, and, in brief, all the rest in Behring's Sea except Behring's Island, which belongs to Kamtchatka. Will this strait, the confluence of seas and severance of empires, be always a mere Indian ford in Summer and ice causeway in Winter, or will it ever be a commercial thoroughfare? The crossing-point is below the Arctic Circle—a thousand miles in latitude below where Wrangel reached; the snow, as usual in high latitudes, does not fall so freely as further south. Once across the straits, and a coach and four in Summer could be guided without an upset straight to St. Petersburg. There are no hostile Indians on the way. Some day, some adventurous American, of the ocean-yachting sort, will drive his chaise or sleigh from New York into St. Petersburg or Paris.

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